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Great Expectations: stability and change in English teaching: the teacher as chameleon

Dr Anita Jetnikoff (QUT)

The theme of this year's conference is stability and change: what has stayed the same and what is new?

Curriculum is always in a state of flux and so often the moves to 'reform' it are political rather than pedagogical. And I like Shane Koyczan's view of politics in his slam poem, 'This is my voice'. He says "politics you know – "poli" meaning many and "tics", meaning blood sucking butt lumps" (Koyczan, 2011). So often in these days of accountability we focus on the learner, data and outcomes. I want to focus on the teacher and how we survive a constantly changing curriculum. I suggest we have to find effective aspects of pedagogical models of English teaching within the current framework and see what still works in practice. At the chalkface or "screen face" there are still teaching, learning and assessment practices in English surviving from the last few decades of pedagogical change; and there is also room for accommodating new practices; including the challenges of technology, its platforms and interfaces. Embracing and adapting the old and the new and working with each other productively may be the key to staying creative and passionately engaged with our subject area.

I want to focus on the teacher in this presentation, because we are working not in mechanistic systems but in communities of people. And as the erudite educator Sir Ken Robinson says in one of his TED talks:

There is no system in the world or any school in the country that is better than its teachers. Teachers are the lifeblood of the success of schools. But teaching is a creative profession. Teaching, properly conceived, is not a delivery system. You know, you're not there just to pass on received information. Great teachers do that, but what great teachers also do is mentor, stimulate, provoke, engage. (Creative Commons, 2009)

In spite of this affirmation of teachers' importance in education, English educators think we have to 'fit' whatever new policy model comes our way. The Australian curriculum seems to have tried to please every stakeholder in its process and as such has been formed without a single, unifying coherent theoretical basis. If we examine the plethora of changes in the pedagogical models in our repertoire, those of us who have been teaching across decades can see these mapped out. Here are some of the recent shifts in junior secondary in English (Qld) in the last decade and please forgive my use of acronyms, even understanding these makes us chameleons. I assume all Queenslanders here will know most of these:

- Qld syllabus 1994 (sociocultural or text-context model)

- 2005 Open trial syllabus (sociocultural/ critical) (QSCC)
- 2008 Essential Learnings (sociocultural/ critical) (QSA)
- 2008 NAPLAN
- 2009 NCB- 'Shape of English' drafts and consultation processes
- 2011 ACARA planning in all states (QSA & EQ)
- 2012 AC:E implementation (QSA)
- C2C is "adopted" in many Qld state schools as an interpretation of AC: E
- 2014 QSA changes its name to QCAA
- 2015 year 7 enters secondary sector
- Future senior OP to external exams?
- 2018? Senior AC:E

This is merely a linear map of some of the changes affecting us. The Australian Curriculum English (AC:E) is an online document, (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014) which means that even our framework is constantly changing, as each new state or subject area joins the National agenda, changes are made. Sometimes I feel like the coyote constantly chasing the roadrunner: knowing I'll never get to fully digest this fast moving feast. The net effect of some of the changes listed above is an increasing deprofessionalisation of teachers. Schools don't work without good, professional teachers. The best work comes from passionate teachers who have the autonomy to interpret the curriculum. Certainly some of these imposed measures have been antithetical to that reality.

I know there is excellent work going on in schools, but much of it is in spite of standardised testing, rather than in response to it. Testing is useful if it is diagnostic and if measures to follow up on the results are taken. Research from the University of Melbourne shows that kids most likely to benefit from testing diagnostics are least likely to take the tests (Wyn, 2014). The pervasive culture of standardised testing makes education impersonal because the focus is on achieving performance statistics and retaining funding, rather than an interest in the individual's ability.

So here's an interesting idea; perhaps these things go together, not as a conspiracy theory but a combined strategy with the effect of eroding of the higher order thinking skills we might wish to encourage in our students. We were told to expunge 'critical literacy' which if taught well allowed kids to think and read beyond a text's face value to its culturally constructed underlying ideas and then we introduced NAPLAN which allows for very little critical thinking as much of it caters to one right answer, a tick or a miss, or reproduction of a formulaic text type. Literacy is defined broadly in the AC: E as "expanding the repertoire of English usage". Literacies as we understand them are to do with the manner in which we receive and produce texts across the all modes which can lead to our students attaining global citizenship skills. Such skills are certainly not tested by NAPLAN, which ostensibly is our literacy measuring tool. When I go to my professional association presentations my

ears burn with teachers complaining about how much time they are forced to spend on practicing nonsense NAPLAN tests that many of them do not believe in. These tests do little more than rank order, creating shame or pride. They construct a false competition over whose school is better; using empty metrics gathered from a single slice of time, which do not and cannot reflect the subtle and various nuanced learning that occurs in English classrooms across the country.

In the junior secondary context obviously the megalith of the ever changing online versions of the AC: E is new. With its elaborate architecture and its myriad of sub-strand elaborations, we might ask: if there is a unifying theoretical model of English in the AC: E? Are the pedagogical models still there in this new framework? The AC: E is as complex as the outcomes-based 2005 Queensland 1-10 English Syllabus (QSA, 2005), but without the explicit, unified coherent text-context language model that underpinned it. My solution to this is to superimpose the socio-cultural critical model or Green's 3D model, which makes sense, onto the architectural strands of the AC: E and the Senior Syllabus. It fits although it has to be teased out and explained to new teachers who may have no background in the theoretical models. I teach them about the history and the strengths and weaknesses of skills and drills of traditional grammar and the cultural heritage model of the 60s and before; the personal growth model from which emerged the personal response journal; the Systemic Functional influence on genres and text types and register and the critical literacy model. These all espoused different pedagogical approaches to language and text. These domains are among our central concerns in English and were acknowledged in previous syllabus frameworks, which took the best of each approach into pedagogical practice.

With my Pre-service teachers I spend considerable time unpacking the vocabulary of the sociocultural-critical language, literacy and literature models onto the new curriculum frameworks of the Australian curriculum and the Senior Syllabus. I start with the aims.

Aim 1. learn to [listen](#) to, [read](#), [view](#), [speak](#), [write](#), [create](#) and reflect on increasingly complex and sophisticated spoken, written and [multimodal texts](#) across a growing range of [contexts](#) with accuracy, fluency and *purpose*. This description reflects a sociocultural model of English combined with multiliteracies if we note the AC: E's organisation of texts to be produced in schools revolves around "purposes and contexts" across all modes.

Aim 2: appreciate, enjoy and use the English language in all its variations and develop a sense of its richness and power to evoke feelings, convey information, form ideas, facilitate interaction with others, entertain, persuade and argue. This aim pertains to purposes of language and encompasses the personal growth model as well as the sociocultural approach to texts.

Aim 3: understand how [Standard Australian English](#) works in its spoken and written forms and in combination with non-linguistic forms of communication to [create](#) meaning. This is more of a conundrum, with the reference to Standard Australian English, however the focus on meaning making takes us back to the idea of the sociocultural model derived from Systemic Functional

Linguistics, which always has meaning making at its heart. The Language strand is broadly defined as students: “knowing about the English language”, which begs the question how can this best be taught?

Aim 4: develop interest and skills in inquiring into the [aesthetic](#) aspects of [texts](#), and develop an informed [appreciation](#) of literature. This word appreciation seems to refer back to the cultural Heritage model of literature which originally had the aim of civilising the populace through literature. The Literature strand is broadly defined as students: understanding, appreciating, responding to, analysing and [creating literature](#). The word appreciation, however, is qualified by “informed” which suggests a critical reading of literary texts.

The emphasis on aesthetics *seems* to be new, but it is not. In the Queensland senior syllabus, the writing team of the 2010 syllabus spent much time discussing this aspect of English. Is the reemphasising of this feature a result of pining for the Keats' beauty and truth maxim, or a knee jerk reaction against critical literacy's perceived erosion of time spent on deconstructing rather than “appreciating literature”? Some teachers argued that exclusive focus on the critical eroded a focus on aesthetics; and the language model which many understood as making good sense, was suddenly hard to find. Critical literacy at its best was always about transformation involving aesthetics (Misson & Morgan, 2006). In the ACE critical and creative thinking go together as one of the general capabilities across the curriculum. Imagination and creativity have always been central to the concerns of English teachers, as we are they purveyors of narrative and the keepers and tellers of stories. Fiction is legitimate in our learning area and for this we can be eternally grateful. When I consider NAPLAN data I often think, “I wish this was fiction” and then I realise it almost is. I think English teachers are good at teaching aesthetics.

And where in the AC: E was the unified coherent theory around language which came from the theoretical underpinnings of SFL combined with the critical literacy concept of reading position? There is talk that we have gone beyond genre. But I am not sure we have. Our contextualized tasks are still framed in terms of “audience, purpose and context”, all of which occur in the content elaborations of the AC: E and these are recognizable as belonging to the text-context model. I also think this is kind of framing of assessment tasks is absolutely necessary, as long as people keep in sight that students are producing particular text types for literate citizenship. As long as the formula doesn't preclude experimentation with form and application of imaginative playing with those forms to create something new, we are on the right track. That is what literature has always done. We need to keep sight of what we value as English teachers, one of which is surely the role of the imagination in our work.

What do we value as English teachers?

I asked this question at this point in the speech and was delighted to hear the responses. Beginning teachers will often respond by saying, “I want to make a difference” or “I love fiction and literature”.

How do you respond when you've been out there for some time and feel a bit tired? For me, I think I value the role I can play in equipping our students to become 21 C literate citizens, and part of that is to foster the role of the imagination. We need to keep sight of what we value so that the outside agenda does not squeeze the joy out of our profession. A culture of compliance is rarely creative.

What else is stable? Modelling and scaffolding is still important in allowing students to master certain texts. We hopefully don't abandon it because the context-text language model seems to be implicit rather than explicitly described. It is still there inherently in how we teach and how we design summative assessment tasks. I do not mean our students must mimetically reproduce a model. It is , however, important to provide a possible textual structure upon which they can then invent and embellish for a particular audience, purpose and context. The text-context model has a lot going for it. It allows a coat hanger upon which a nice tailored coat can be hung, or even a new, wild coat of many colours which plays and experiments with form and language, transforming a stimulus text. It allows the structure of a literary intervention to be recreated, so that the focus can be on the role of the imagination in playing with the language of the task or developing or transforming the form of it.

I was discussing recently with a Masters student, who has conducted an excellent study on explicit teaching across subject areas including English. It was interesting to see that although we think we are doing explicit teaching, we are sometimes hijacking the central purpose for which we do things. When this teacher had taught poetry, using the language of appraisal The year 8 students remembered the appraisal terms, but did not realise they were dealing with poetry and claimed not to have covered it in the curriculum. There is a danger here in overlaying the same linguistic system on everything and forgetting the aesthetic and imaginative purpose of the texts under study. This happened with critical literacy too and it became tedious for some to approach it in this way.

We seemed to purge the explicit underlying theory of the previous Syllabus and replace it with a diluted version with some vestiges of critical literacy concepts such as identities and representations and the long list: values, attitudes and beliefs instead of a perfectly good single word term like "Discourse." Just because the language of the Syllabus changes, it does not mean valid linguistic concepts have to suddenly be abandoned. We can use these systems judiciously in a balanced program across literature, language and literacy as defined by the AC: E.

In fact we are still adhering to the idea that certain texts have certain forms and generic patterns and conventions. This exists in the first two of the exit criteria of the Qld senior syllabus and it is there in the content elaborations of the AC: E. Texts do not exist outside of a social context, so we can't abandon that model until someone comes up with something that says different things are happening with language. We are seeing new hybrid forms emerging in literature and in online spaces and hypertext allows for non-linear progressions of story lines and narrative conventions. Yet, when we ask students to write an extended short story we are still looking for certain language features, grammatical structures and narrative conventions. We are still evaluating whether the student has

mastered or at least has certain handle on the manipulation of aesthetic features.

So while we are asking for patterns and conventions in mandated text-types in the syllabus, we are asking for genres, even if the categorisation of the range of texts no longer conforms to the original view of genres in Systemic Functional Linguistics. We don't want students to merely be writing mimetically and yet we have to give them the frame, or the coat hanger on which to hang the textual coat to extend my previous metaphor. We are delighted if the coat is either tailored well or has many creative colours and reflects 'flair'. This word is often mentioned informally to describe students' control or mastery of aesthetics. In the Standards Elaborations in both junior and senior secondary English in Queensland, we tend to refer to "discernment". Certain students have it and show it in their writing although some never attain it. This control over language brings me to grammar, since there is a renewed focus on this aspect of textual features across current English frameworks.

So where do we stand on grammar?

We still cannot agree on how to teach this important aspect of linguistic mastery, even though many of us agree that it is important. Policy deems that we need to be teaching it, but there is no clarity or agreement on how best this should be done (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2013). I am an advocate of teaching grammar and I teach it largely to a generation of students; many of whom didn't learn it because their teachers couldn't teach it, because they had not learnt it. This is a kind of negative "cultural reproduction" in pedagogical terms. Yet somehow miraculously, these people can read and write well enough to get through their degrees and function as literate citizens.

There is an awful lot of fear around grammar. It is a buzz word and it is an old one. Many of the rules of grammar harken back to the rules governing Latin, which is not English in its specificities of syntax, conjugational rules, its patterns or its use. I support the teaching of grammar in the context of the students own reading, speaking, writing and design. This is where the language resources of appraisal, the interpersonal aspects of functional grammar are very powerful, as they have been substantively shown to improve student's writing and their confidence in transferring reading to writing especially dealing with students' ability to effectively intensify descriptions, and use language effectively to appeal to emotions, delineate character and manipulate a reading. The interpersonal aspect of Functional grammar known as appraisal, for instance, has been shown to improve kids writing in high stakes tests such as QCS (Ferguson, 2002). Knowledge of appraisal takes training and there are many teachers who function in classrooms with a rudimentary knowledge of grammar. Instead these teachers are perhaps using an intuitive understanding of what it is to write well thanks to a legacy of wide reading; that connection at least is well proven. Again I urge balance. Appraisal is a powerful set of linguistic tools for analysis and composition, but it does not have to be front and centre of everything in English.

Multimodal texts have altered what used to be familiar territory with the modes students are asked to

access and create. With this in mind writing has become “designing” (G. Kress, 2010; G. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) which was reflected in the Queensland Essential Learnings framework, but is given the more generic term “creating” in the AC:E. The implications for teachers here are that knowledge of visual grammars as well as mastery of and access to new technologies is becoming mandatory (Maun & Myhill, 2005). Schools are still catching up with this. In terms of storage and retrieval, we could perhaps be using secure forms of cloud technology. Interesting work being done in schools is often still submitted to panel on paper, which doesn't capture the magic of the original multimodal text. I asked in this speech if anyone out there was doing innovative multimodal things with texts and to my delight many people raised their hands.

Speaking with my state review panellist's hat on, however, there's a sameness to the senior folios because of the mandated text types, but there are so many more interpretations of those text types described in the syllabus than those presented in folios. Even the stimulus literary texts seem to be the same few novels and plays. I know there is much beautiful, effective multimodal work going on, but I wonder what else there could be? I wonder if we could push the boundaries more in terms of the interpretations of the mandated tasks so that as Kress suggested some years ago, we are “doing new things with texts” (2006). I don't accept the idea that there is no time to look at these in multimodal form on panel. Film, TV and New Media panellists evaluate digital texts on laptops all the time.

Constraints on word lengths account for certain kinds of print based text types. A complex hypertext or other multimodal text may not be best described by a word length. Do we really have enough understandings of these new literacy and multimodal text types to be able to assess them beyond calling on a list of complementary features as just one aspect of the whole text? Pre-service teachers ask these kinds of questions and they are valid ones to ask. Also we often ask students to create multimodal and mediated texts, when many of the professional complex models out there that such as the digital novel, “Inanimate Alice”, (Pullinger, 2006) are “transmedia” products of team work. A published novelist, Kate Pullinger and her collaboration with a skilled professional design team of more than a dozen people created “Inanimate Alice”. If we ask students to create multimodal texts in response to such texts, the forms will most likely be much less professional? Is this English? I'm suggesting that yes it is because it is about text and it is about language and we are doing literacy as we engage with such texts as readers. Just as we do not ask students to create novels, even though they read them. We can think about appropriate forms of response to such media using media.

Another concern is whether or not we have the skills as educators to teach these new forms or the time to learn them or the knowledge to create the conditions under which these sorts of texts can flourish. I'm hoping we can be more flexible about the way we construct and assess multimodal tasks. One solution is to use mentoring and talent within existing staff to deploy the skills that some teachers have to teach others. This can ensure that in-service is a shared enterprise rather than having an outside PD session that does not really get imbibed unless it pertains exactly to what

teachers are currently doing in their classrooms. We know from research that the one-off model of PD does not really work (Jetnikoff & Smeed, 2012).

What has not changed is that there are no more hours in the day to all the extra things that we expected to do now as English educators. Teachers who are constrained by the constantly changing curriculum and shifting educational context, are often too overwhelmed to be learning anything new with technology (Dezuanni & Jetnikoff, 2011). On a daily basis we deal with heavy teaching loads, large class sizes, and increased administration across technological platforms and preparation for centralised National and localised high stakes testing at all levels of the curriculum. All of this erodes time that could be devoted to creativity in the classroom (Dezuanni & Jetnikoff, 2011). We are increasingly held responsible for high stakes testing literacy outcomes and yet much of this has nothing to do with real literacy. This I think is the ability to move heterglossically through different contexts involving writing, reading, speaking, listening and processing all of those in the course of any given day through work, home and leisure pursuits many of which include technologies. As teachers in the midst of all this, do we even have time to read literature for leisure and pleasure?

Recently I was asked at another keynote at a school do we really need to be doing this multimodal or media work in English. Do we have time to do more than “just in time” learning? English teachers, responsible for the school literacy programs are now becoming visual art teachers, design teachers, old basics such as spelling and punctuation and varied types of grammar knowledge, and new basics are required alongside each other. Teaching multiliteracies means we do need to teach students the multi modal texts that dominate our lives. Through learning to read critically and create with visual grammar students can learn how media texts work on us, how they work the world and how all texts word the world.

We are doing new things with texts. This is what Literature has always been about. Stylistic invention and transgressing the forms that preceded them is par for the course in the history of the literary tradition. I wonder though if we have become somewhat reductionist in our thinking about the forms of text that are valued by our culture. We are we still assessing largely through writing. In junior secondary I know that the GC of ICTs across the curriculum means there is an impetus to include these kinds of texts in classrooms.

In practice English teachers know literacy is also about self-confident speakers and writers who understand the notion of voice and talking back to a text- our democratic privilege in a country where freedom of speech is allowed. And what does the future hold for senior assessment, if to bring us in line with other states we are to move to more external assessment, possibly more like the junior secondary QCTs used to be, where schools design the tasks. Will this mean more teaching to tests at senior level? I have always been opposed to exams and in particular to those dedicated to standardised testing. I know we already spend time preparing for QCS, but there are implications for us as teachers if this is the case.

Do we still think that print alone is necessary but not sufficient as espoused at the turn of the millennium in the Literate Futures document?? ACE wants us to be embracing technology to teach literacy and yet the infrastructure isn't there to support effective use of the one to one ratio of computers to students. We have tools available but we are time poor in learning new technologies and we may lack the skills around the teaching of self-representation in online environments. Fear around exposing kids to “demons” accessing open interactive web 2.0 online platforms means many schools filter these and leave students to access them only on phones- which means no one is watching.

Technology demands for teachers across the curriculum are new, both in terms of policy and in the architecture of the AC: E. One to one laptops at least in the junior school are now prevalent, although I wonder if this changed our pedagogy in classrooms. We may be using repositories like the learning place as a storage and retrieval site. No doubt the state run data management system needs new infrastructure. Ironically we use more paper than ever now, even though we are composing more and more on PCs and tablets, I think of the commercial TV morning show where Shaun Mcallef was asked to comment on the generational uses of technology. David Campbell asked Mcallef to comment on the "paperless society" to which he replied without missing a beat, "the paperless society, do you mean one without a pope ?" In fact there are many discussions on all kinds of media suggesting it's a misguided notion to assume that digital media is categorically greener. Now there is an issue for a unit on sustainability.

We do have to change our pedagogy to accommodate students' attention being centred on their phones, PCs or tablets rather than listening to a teacher. We have long given over our “authority” as the centre of knowledge in the classroom in assuming a pedagogy of group work and student centred learning, but the infrastructure of school still depends on a hierarchy of power focussed on people, not machines. There are all kinds of interesting digital experiments and creative applications to be deployed in the classroom, many of which were addressed in the last ETAQ PD which focussed on the visual and digital in classrooms. I have also written about many of these approaches and over the last decade and am still excited about the possibilities for these platforms in classrooms.

Computers and tablets obviously offer more than just word processing tools. Interactive digital platforms, applications of gaming technology accessibility to all kinds of information and stimulus material leaves the world and beyond open for exploration. The problem now becomes what to include and what to access and what to leave out. The obvious concerns around predatory behaviour online leaving our students open to exploitation constitute a kind of moral panic, but it has a real basis and it feeds other kinds of fears. One of these fears could be that young people know more about technology than many of us educators who have been in the game for a long time can know. And they can do more with it too. They are higher risk takers. Having been a champion of technology over the years, I have some personal “rules of thumb.”

I am an advocate of using technology creatively to create and design, rather than as a fast, expensive typewriter with spell and grammar checks built in. I am sure many teachers agree with this position. Technology for its own sake can be counterproductive if it means students being chained to their PC or even doing activities using interactive online tools in real time at the expense of talking with one another and processing ideas in class using their imaginations and real voices. Something gets lost in this I think. It may be the social aspect of classroom life that gets lost in the desire to bring the wider “interconnected” world in in the fragmented time offered by the digital now. Do we lose more than we gain, if young people lose the ability to actually communicate with one another and with elders and turn take in live interactions? Actually talking face to face and learning to listen to other's ideas and challenging those intellectually, imaginatively and with humour, can sometimes be lost when the interactive platform becomes the centre of the communication.

In a recent joint PD school project on using technology, one young teacher remarked, "mobile phones and tablets make things so easy", but the school was using neither in the curriculum. There is some sense of frustration that school policy militates against the use of this technology blocks the chance to use it creatively and pedagogically. Students and teachers alike need to master technology to become competent, global citizens. Students have this in their personal literacy repertoires. They can do almost everything with their phones. I have heard ‘tales’ of students engaging in every other platform available to them on their phones, whilst the teacher reading the classic novel as they “followed”. Indeed asking them to put them away for two hour tutorial at university is like asking them to cut off an arm. In my “Literature in Secondary Teaching class” I modelled an Alan Ginsberg poem which is a modern adaptation of the 17 syllable haiku form, but about everyday subjects. I wrote and read to them: “Asking students to put their phones away is like severing a limb”; which was greeted with wry smiles and nervous twitters as hands wanting to reach for the ubiquitous phones began to jitter.

There's a shift occurring. The Facebook demographic for this social media site is much older than teens. When students' mothers are on Facebook, it may seem less cool than it once was. Many of my tertiary students use it to organise their study groups, although the more serious ones are using the ‘Dropbox’ application to transfer documents without the banter time that occupies some devotees of Facebook. The share price of Twitter has fallen because they want to sell but no one wants to buy. Yet Facebook is supplanting twitter in terms of its marketing value. Young people like the immediate gratification of the “Kik” and “Snapchat” apps on their phones because they can be transgressive with these. Personally I enjoy Instagram because, even before I became a film maker, I have always enjoyed the pleasure of playing with words and images together. I am also highly aware of data mining and I am careful not to “like” pics with brands in them and I refuse to “follow” anyone who is obviously advertising. My resistance to advertising sentiments are coming to the fore. Having said that I do not check my IG status in class!

I think we also need to ask about these platforms in terms of English; what kind of writing and

shaping and what kind of reading and viewing is being done here? Blogs are touted as the new way to journal; however, the language deployed on many blogs is very informal and certainly does not always model the standard Australian written English we are supposed to be modelling and assessing in the Australian curriculum. What our students don't always have is access to the powerful genres that will see them through tertiary education, and/or through working life. Here I mean more than the basic skills of literacy to write with some command of the language, to speak cogently, to be able to argue a case and the power to read and view critically, including questioning the reliability of the plethora of online platforms and social media sites on which many depend to stay informed about the world- that is if they do. We can teach students these things: we have the skills, knowledge and creative ability to allow them to master these text types as well as more imaginative ones. Like the fictional bionic man, "we have the technology". This is so even if the infrastructure in schools has some catching up to do to support it effectively.

Some years ago I attended a session called the "Future of the book" at the State Library of Queensland. A collective gasp was raised when the gentleman giving the talk suggested that very soon print based texts would be outmoded and everyone would be reading on tablets. The majority of the attendees were librarians and this seemed anathema to them. Now much of what I read is on a tablet, although I still love to browse the shelves of the library and read books in print. There are distinct advantages to e books, not the least of which is convenience and price of purchase. A late night hankering for a particular text will often see me searching online book stores and purchasing immediately- none of this slow ordering through bookstores and waiting while the print version is ordered indeed is no longer available due its print run being terminated. Teachers can change the texts they use without the cumbersome "class set" copies managed through the library. E books make literature affordable and accessible, provided we have the expensive tablets to view these on. iTunes cards make purchases easy for the students if the school is using tablet technology. I am a writer in margins and I love the fact that I can highlight section of text, or make notes and then come back to them later if I want to think more about a particular idea. There is a lot to be said for e books. At this point in the keynote I played a digital story, the text of which I will insert:

The turtle and the book

No one medium alone can master the past:

So here's an equation I wish to impart

Information is not equal to knowledge.

Data is only smart or useful when

something good or truthful is done with it.

Tell as turtle that speed is what's important

and she'll look up with ancient eyes
and shake her wrinkled head at you before
closing her eyes and retreating
into her portable shelter.

She shuts herself up like an old finished book
to recall her first run to the ocean.

Just so, taking time to sit and read
may be a lost art left to elders, but I still
love the smell and feel of paper.

I still feel joy when I retreat into the world of words.

I am most at home when writing
cryptic insights on the crisp edges of tomes.

Just so my poems are always scribbled first by hand.

When the polemics die down over book or e print
in the end it's just a portal for the story,
just a vessel for the words
and what they might mean in the mystery
of one's own reading

So what are our solutions?

I seem to have spent considerable time outlining the challenges we face as teachers. Don't think for a minute that I am not at the chalkface or the screen face. I take very seriously my brief to prepare pre-service teachers to teach in schools and so I have to keep on top of every change before or as it happens so that they are prepared for when it happens out there, struggling as beginning teachers with the exhausting regime of schools as new work places. I absolutely applaud ETAQ and its beginning teachers' day. Every time this is run my students report back excitedly about what else they have learnt to prepare them to teach. So please let's continue that.

The solution to the hidden theory is that it has to be made explicit. I always tell my pre-service teachers, you can effectively modify your pedagogical practice if understand the theory that underpins it. If we don't know what drives change, and if we don't question it, we may as well return to the idea that all texts have one true way of meaning as Leavisites would have us believe. If that is the case, we may as well deliver our lessons with sets of isolated little exercises that keep people entertained or busy, but which don't particularly empower students to be better thinkers, or better writers or speakers or purposeful, creative users of English.

The solution to fear of technology use is to experiment and to share. I am not a “digital native” but a digital traveller. I love to play with technology and everything I have learnt I have done by experimenting with it. One of the best aspects of working with young people is what they teach me about technology. Experienced teachers can tap into young teachers' technological familiarity to get things moving. Real mentoring, like learning, works best if there is a genuine exchange between mentor and mentee.

What is a functioning, literate 21st citizen able to do? We are living in a time of immense and rapid change within and outside of formal educational contexts. Everyone has an opinion on what literacy is and policy documents are driven by political rather than educational agendas. There are immense challenges still in front of us when we are under so much pressure to perform to these imposed agendas. Many of us are reeling from the multifarious demands, the public (mis) perception of literacy and English teachers have taken a media and public perception bashing in recent years. Can we do it all? Many educators feel we can't, but it's partly because we also live in a culture of compliance whose professionalism is under scrutiny. At what point do we say “Enough! Trained educators are the ones who know best how to educate, we are body of professionals. Back off and let us teach”.

To survive in this time of constant change, I think we need not just to equip our students to become 21 C literate citizens, but to foster our own and our students' imaginations. We need to find the balance in our teaching between structure and play; and in our lives between work, relationships and self-care. These are some of things I personally and professionally value about being a teacher. It is important to keep sight of the value of human experience and what we bring to the table as teachers of English. As the great physicist Einstein said, “Creativity is intelligence having fun”. So let's stay creative and continue to share what we value. This is an approach that can keep us motivated and fulfilled as teachers of English.

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